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## **55% favor higher cigarette tax**

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Kentuckians want a tax increase.

A majority of 600 likely voters surveyed in a Herald-Leader/WKYT Kentucky Poll said they favor increasing the state's cigarette tax by 70 cents to \$1 a pack, a proposal unsuccessfully pushed by Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear during the 2008 session of the General Assembly.

The poll found that 55 percent support the tax increase, 34 percent oppose it and 11 percent were not sure.

A majority of Democrats and independents support the tax increase, while a plurality of Republicans — 47 percent — oppose it.

Most survey respondents also disagreed with the Republican-controlled state Senate's decision to nix a 25-cent increase in the cigarette tax that cleared the Democratic-controlled state House.

Fifty-seven percent of those surveyed disagreed with the legislature's decision, compared with 36 percent who agreed. The poll was conducted by Research 2000 of Olney, Md., from May 7 to May 9. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The results reflect voters' frustration with the state budget, said Scott Lasley, a professor of political science at Western Kentucky University.

The budget passed by the legislature has forced universities to raise tuition and halt faculty raises; in addition, budgets for human services and other departments have been cut.

Raising cigarette taxes is more palatable to voters than other taxes. "This is one that people can choose to pay or not," Lasley said. "And that makes it attractive, particularly to non-smokers."

But voter support doesn't always translate into legislative victories.

"The Republican majority in the Senate expressed no interest at all in raising the cigarette tax during the recent legislative session," Beshear said. "Only time will tell whether those circumstances will change."

An economic downturn could make it easier, said Senate Minority Whip Joey Pendleton, D-Hopkinsville.

"With the way the economy is going, the public is going to pressure the legislature," he said.

That pressure will get more intense after July, when the state's fiscal year begins and budget cuts kick in, Pendleton predicted.

Republicans weren't ready to raise the cigarette tax this session, said Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville. "Many of them could vote for cigarette taxes as a last resort, if the economy went down," he said.

But Williams thinks that's unlikely. Economic indicators are already looking better for Kentucky, he said, and state tax receipts won't be as bad as the Beshear administration predicted, meaning that the budget won't have to be as lean as previously thought, Williams said.

Kentucky's cigarette tax was raised from 3 cents to 30 cents a pack in 2005. Even so, Kentucky has the third-lowest cigarette tax in the nation. Nationally, cigarette taxes average \$1.11 a pack.

The states bordering Kentucky have an average tax of 70 cents a pack. Only Missouri, at 17 cents a pack, has a lower tax. Virginia has the same rate as Kentucky.

The Kentucky Tobacco and Candy Association argues that any increase will make convenience store retailers less competitive with cigarette sellers in neighboring states, but that an increase to \$1 a pack would be especially hard.

"We would be even or above every one of our neighboring states except Ohio," said Marvin Gray, executive director of the association, which represents the wholesalers who sell to convenience stores.

Gray, who doesn't support the increase, says voter support for a tax increase won't make it easier for the measure to pass the legislature.

But, the American Lung Association of Kentucky argues that politicians might as well raise the tax by 70 cents since they don't lose significant support by doing so.

"If you're going to raise the darn tax, raise the tax," said Mike Kuntz, a lobbyist for the American Lung Association of Kentucky.

The association supports a 75-cent increase because the health benefits increase as the price per pack rises. Studies have shown that every 10 percent increase in the price of a pack of cigarettes reduces youth smoking by 7 percent, Kuntz said.

"It's like a vaccine for kids and smoking," Kuntz said.

To increase the price of a pack 10 percent in Kentucky, the state would have to raise the tax by at least 30 cents. Reducing the number of youths who start smoking would eventually reduce the total number of smokers, Kuntz said.

Kentucky has the highest smoking rate in the nation, 28.6 percent of adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 12 percent of middle school students and 24.6 percent of high school students smoke. One in four pregnant women smoke.

Like younger smokers, pregnant women are more likely to quit if the price of cigarettes is raised, Kuntz said. Other smokers are less price sensitive.

Keturah Prophet, general manager of the Tobacco Station on Versailles Road, said that the last time the cigarette tax went up, many customers said they were going to quit. But a week later, those people were back at her store. "They all say they're going to quit, but cigarettes are the most addicting drug that's out there," Prophet said.

Still, Prophet doesn't support an increase in the cigarette tax.

"I'm a smoker," she explained. "Why don't they add another increase to alcohol?"

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